Workshop on Solitude and Community in Contemporary Chinese Culture

May 15th 2024, 10am-5.30pm
University of Oxford China Centre
Lecture Theatre

The relationship between solitude and community resonates across the making of culture: creativity is often seeded in the tranquillity of solitude; but it also blooms in spaces of community. In the aftermath of China's strict Zero-COVID, policy, when millions of people were confined to their homes for months in states of isolation, questions about this intersection between being alone and being together are more pertinent than ever. This workshop focusses in particular on the insights their relationship offers into the ways in which seemingly disparate makers of culture navigate uncertainty in China and Hong Kong today. Placing the loneliness of the prison cell alongside solitary spectatorship of censored documentaries; linking online communities of transnational authors to the network of world-cities in which they live; and exploring the overlapping tensions between being singular and plural in contemporary poetry, this workshop shows how community and solitude, as multi-media and multi-scalar concepts, illuminate the bonds of sociality in uncertain times.

Workshop Programme

10am-10.15am: Welcome and Introduction

10.15am-11.15am: Federico Picerni (University of Bologna), "Solitude and Community, Singular and Plural, Poet and Class: Overlaps in Workers' Poetry"

11.15am-11:45am: Coffee

11.45am-12.45pm: Margaret Hillenbrand (University of Oxford), "Digital Documentaries, Solitary Spectatorship"

12.45-2pm: Lunch

2pm-3pm: Pang Laikwan (Chinese University of Hong Kong), "Writing Behind Bars: The Fandom That Queers Our Political Subjectivity"

3pm-4pm: Carwyn Morris (Leiden University), "In the Shadow of the World City: City Identity and Community in China"

4pm-4.30pm: Coffee

4.30pm-5.30pm: Huang Qian (University of Groningen), "Chinese Female Transnational-Romance Content Creators' Cautious Labor in Daily Production and Community Management"

5.30pm-6.30pm: Reception

To register, please contact Margaret Hillenbrand
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ABSTRACTS

Federico Picerni, "Solitude and Community, Singular and Plural, Poet and Class: Overlaps in Workers' Poetry"

Contemporary Chinese workers' poetry is characterised by several dualities, which are sometimes understood in binary, oppositional terms. We have the contrast between authors who write mostly in solitude, unnoticed by the literary establishment, and those who find ways to visibility; the uneasy relationship between the singularity of each author's own creative mind and the influence played on their writing by the social condition they share as workers; and, last but not least, the individual motivation of finding realisation as poets (thus playing along, or challenging, the dynamics of the literary field) and how it relates to the possible symptoms of class consciousness that can be found in workers' verses. This talk observes how these multiple dynamics unfold in the socio-literary activity of two worker poets, Xu Lizhi and Xiao Hai. The two operate(d) in much different contexts: Xu Lizhi never seemed to make his breakthrough as a poet and eventually took his own life, while Xiao Hai found some sort of salvation by joining the Picun writing group in Beijing. In both authors' poetry, however, we find individual aspirations, personal feelings and a variegated array of cultural references that would perhaps be unexpected among worker poets, coupled with some of the strongest social critique from a working-class standpoint that can arguably be found in China's cultural landscape today. By discussing these characteristics, the talk will explore how the dialectic coexistence of the dualities outlined above constitutes a basic trait of postsocialst workers' poetry in China – and quite a germinating one.

Margaret Hillenbrand, "Digital Documentaries, Solitary Spectatorship"

The sociology and sociality of film spectatorship remain an understudied field; but the consensus of the research which does exist on this topic is that watching together is the most meaningful mode. If spectatorship has a scale of value, its zenith lies with Bollywood filmgoers, whose participatory audience style turns film theatres into pulsating spaces of performance in their own right. This point holds particularly true of filmmaking which revives memories of repressed pasts: active spectatorship in the shared space of a darkened film theatre is typically taken as the most effective way to resurrect buried remembrance. By contrast, watching films alone is considered sad sport, especially since the advent of streaming has ushered in borderline pathological practices of binge-watching: lonely marathon spectatorship that researchers have linked to insomnia, depression, anxiety, and disordered eating. This paper explores digital documentaries from China to suggest the

opposite. It argues that solitary spectatorship has hugely expanded as the state has cracked down on public exhibition of independent film and as Covid-19 has fragmented audiences further into states of isolated confinement. And as technologies from hand-held camcorders to responsive touchscreen devices to grid-view videotelephony platforms narrow the distance between documentary subjects and their viewers, the meanings of watching alone in an increasingly haptic digitized mediascape are changing. More than this, solitude itself is not simply the state of forlorn atomization from others. It can also be a time of generative reflection during which lone spectatorship acquires even more meaning, particularly when the topic of filmmaking is politically provocative. As suggested by the Shanghai lockdown video, *Voices of Spring* (2022), it may even be connected to vital expressions of online and even offline activism.

Pang Laikwan, "Writing Behind Bars: The Fandom That Queers Our Political Subjectivity"

This article is devoted to the writings of a woman political prisoner in Hong Kong, with a focus on her participation in fandom behind bars. In prison, while Gwyneth Ho continues to present well-crafted and relevant social commentaries in her social media, the imprisoned also writes a lot about a popular star. She proudly participates in this fandom even in prison, made possible by other fans diligently sending her news and gossip through regular mail. This article discusses how she expresses ideas related to belonging, love, and freedom during incarceration. She is deprived of her right to liberty, but she insists on practicing her freedom of expression, giving us a new perspective on the meanings of freedom and will. Committed to the city's democracy while indulging in an intense fandom, her prison writings also queer the identity politics that have been so central to Hong Kong's political life thus far.

Carywn Morris, "In the Shadow of the World City: City Identity and Community in China"

This talk will explore ideas of community and solidarity through a focus on cities, examining how cities are classified, how they are grouped, and how they become communities and networks with multifaceted, multi-scalar identities. Within China, cities come together in a variety of formal and informal groupings, including tiered cities (Tier 1 and on), megaregions (Jing-Jin-Ji, Pearl River Delta, etc.), municipalities and sub-provincial cities, smart cities, queer cities, and *wanghong* cities. Internationally, the world city describes cities that facilitate the mobility of capital, the managerial class, and various elites. The world city has thus become a global urban community of sorts, a community that cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are a part of. But this community also excludes, it cannot facilitate all large Chinese cities, and exclusion offers new potential for city identity and city community. From the *wanghong* city to the village-within-a-city, cities become classified, grouped, and understood in new ways. In examining cities as within multi-scalar communities, the talk will wonder: In the shadow of the world city, what cities emerge? And at the same time, how does city classification, grouping, and identity influence the people who (re)produce the cities?

Huang Qian, "Chinese Female Transnational-Romance Content Creators' Cautious Labor in Daily Production and Community Management"

Female content creators whose niche is their transnational romantic relationships are often subject to scrutiny, shaming, and vitriol triggered by nationalism and misogyny in China. Being unable or unwilling to avoid such participatory surveillance by retreating completely from social media platforms, they need to cope with such negativity in their daily production practices as a community and individually. Existing literature on creator studies mainly focuses on content creators' efforts to increase their online visibility, while political scientists mainly engage with concepts such as self-censorship. Therefore, to bridge these two perspectives, this research demonstrates and conceptualizes how they negotiate the expression of authenticity and their visibility when facing participatory surveillance. To achieve this, a reflexive thematic analysis on 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Chinese female transnational-romance content creators is conducted. These female content creators receive varying levels and types of negativity on different platforms due to different user bases, affordances, and the political economy of the specific platforms. In response, they

adopt different strategies regarding account setting, content production, and community management. These practices can be conceptualized as cautious labor, which refers to the combination of emotional and affective labor involved in content creators' daily production practices to negotiate their authenticity and visibility in specific political and socio-cultural contexts.